



Mental Health in the Workplace: Perspectives, Strategy and Actions

Moderator



Edward Moncreiffe
CEO of HSBC Life HK
Panellists

City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong (CMHA HK) recently published a report, titled [Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Workplace: Survey of APAC employees](#) in collaboration with [Oliver Wyman](#). The report highlighted three key issues to be tackled by employers: stigma, presenteeism and a middle-management crunch.

As COVID continues to impact on all aspects of our lives and particularly our workplaces, the need to focus on these areas in order to support the mental health of employees is as important as ever.



May Tan
Former CEO of Standard
Chartered Bank HK

In light of this and to mark World Mental Health Day, CMHA HK hosted a [virtual panel](#) to explore the importance of championing a mental health and wellbeing in the workplace strategy. The panel brought together senior leaders from the legal, financial, insurance, real estate and consultancy sectors to share their perspectives, challenges and provide tangible actions. **Edward Moncreiffe, CEO of HSBC Life HK and Chairperson of the Board of CMHA HK**, moderated the panel.



Peter Reynolds
Partner at Oliver Wyman

A Board Level Issue

A crucial step towards implementing an effective mental health strategy is to elevate the conversation to board level. Panellist **May Tan, former CEO of Standard Chartered Bank HK**, indicated that a lot of strain within businesses comes from ambitious KPIs and budgets that are approved by the board and that, rather than to look at staff mental health as a separate issue, it needs to be assessed holistically against these KPIs to inform a more empathetic and conducive work culture. “If you’re not building a sustainable core team of management to be in the succession line for the business, then we are not doing our job as board directors,” said Tan.



Wendy Chan
Growth Director of
Valuations at JLL Hong Kong

Peter Reynolds, Partner at Oliver Wyman and Board Member of CMHA HK, agreed that “mental health and wellbeing of the workforce is a key part of the social element of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance), and a fundamental part of our company’s sustainability.”



Gilbert Li
Partner at Linklaters

Challenges and Actions

Wendy Chan, Growth Director of Valuations at JLL Hong Kong, expressed that “the ultimate goal for senior leaders is to make a safe space for our staff to discuss mental wellbeing topics in the workplace...it is important for senior leaders to be open and also to champion and drive a systematic change.” Chan also highlighted the importance of being culturally sensitive when implementing mental health strategies within the business.

For example, the issue of stigma related to mental health may be “a symptom of Asian culture and values,” said Tan, and that this could be tackled “through education and changing the culture to say that it is acceptable and mental stress is commonplace”.

“To drive the mental wellbeing agenda we need to have a mix of top-down and bottom-up approaches. We need senior leaders to drive and lead the change but we also need all staff to engage and to create and cultivate an inclusive culture in the workplace,” said Chan.

Gilbert Li, Partner at Linklaters and Board Member of CMHA HK, indicated that mental health issues should not be differentiated from physical health issues, as “it’s just the same thing”. Li also

recognised the importance of senior leaders taking the lead in normalising the conversation around mental health in the workplace.

There was also consensus amongst the panellists that more work needs to be done to fully maximise the value of Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs). Chan noted employee concerns around confidentiality - that the content communicated within EAPs may be relayed to HR staff, which may in turn affect their career development. Clear communication to employees about the programme is key. Reynolds suggested that senior leaders give their own EAP a call to experience it and understand how it works.

Reynolds indicated that it is important to “give people the space, the ability to listen and make them feel that they’re not alone”. Many businesses now offer flexible working programmes, but there is still a stigma associated with them. Reynolds added that it is key to “celebrate people who are really taking advantage of that level of flexibility and willing to step in different directions in their career path...really actively supporting them in those [changes] is critical”.

Key Takeaways

“It is okay to be not okay. For senior leaders I would want to emphasise that when we roll out mental wellbeing programmes it should be done with cultural sensitivity.” – Wendy Chan, Growth Director, Valuations at JLL Hong

“As a board member I would like to evaluate all senior management equal weighting to the financial performance KPI that they need to embrace trust and empathy to create a more sustainable culture within the organisation,”
– May Tan, Former CEO of Standard Chartered HK

“Mental health is like physical health - we all have one, we all have to nurture it. There are people for whom this is a pervasive problem in the same way as people have ongoing physical challenges. For the vast majority of people who are suffering from mental health related problems, it is treatable and really the reason that we’re not helping these people is our fault not theirs.” – Peter Reynolds, Partner at Oliver Wyman

“There will be people who share the same views and values in the organisation. You just have to define them...sometimes you need time and patience to convince your colleagues to join you and convince senior members and the leaders of the team to be your champion, so don’t give up. We’re all on a journey here.” – Gilbert Li, Partner at Linklaters

To conclude the panel, Moncreiffe summarised that embedding mental health as a boardroom priority within workplaces is no longer a tick box exercise. It’s about sustainable business, retention and is a long term strategic issue. The responsibility of senior leaders to create a safe space for staff and to champion a **culture of empathy, empowerment and open communication** is integral to implementing an effective and sustainable mental health strategy.

A full recording of the panel discussion is available [here](#).



The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong is a collaborative venture founded by city businesses. Championed by senior leaders, the Alliance is business led and expert guided and aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers in the city of Hong Kong, share best practice and increase mental health understanding.